

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON ✦ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. DESIREE N. PALACIOS

# A CENTURY OF MEMORIES

ONE OF NATION'S OLDEST SURVIVING FEMALE AIRMEN LOOKS BACK FONDLY ON THE 'GOOD OLD DAYS'

**A**s 38-year-old Mildred McDowell gazed at a picturesque scene on the Rhine River while stationed in post-war Germany, she wished she could share the experience with her father, who had died 15 years earlier.

"I saw something out on the water and thought, 'Oh, I want to remember this and tell Papa about it when I get back,'" Ms. McDowell said. "All at once, it hit me. I really wished he could've seen me in my Air Force uniform."

Through the years, the woman who might be the nation's oldest surviving female veteran has gradually become used to the number of people in her century of memories shrinking as she aged. Ms. McDowell, who celebrated her 103rd birthday on Feb. 17, has outlived all of her siblings, the people she served with during and after World War II, and even many of the students she taught in Illinois one-room schoolhouses before she enlisted at the age of 35 during the war.

A few years before the United States entered World War I, Thomas J. and Ella Nora McDowell's third daughter saw her first "flying machine." The 8-year-old, who would one day be among the nation's first female Airmen, was herding cows on her family's

farm about two miles from Brownstown, Ill.

"That day, I saw three to five of these flying machines flying way down low, and they scared my cattle and scattered them," she said. "They seemed as big to me then as a B-29 [Superfortress] does to me today, and I was sure they buzzed me on purpose."

"I began to cry, 'My cows are all gone. I'll never see my cows again.' But by that time, the planes were gone, and the cows stopped and began to eat."

Symbols of Ms. McDowell's two careers, in education and in the military, decorate her room in the Vandalia Rehabilitation and Health Care Center in Vandalia, Ill., about an hour north-east of St. Louis. A mirror with a retired U.S. Army decal faces her bed, upon which is a neatly folded red, white and blue towel containing the words, "Freedom Is Not Free." On a nearby bookcase is a figurine with an apple, books and the teacher's

slogan: "To Teach is to Touch a Life Forever." A "Peace on Earth" sign hangs on her door.

During a childhood she calls one of the happiest any child

could have, Ms. McDowell and her siblings attended a country school several miles from their home. She rode a horse or



**Mildred McDowell is the Air Force's oldest female World War II veteran at the age of 103. She resides in Vandalia, Ill.**





**Mildred McDowell** keeps an Army sticker on a mirror in her room in Vandalia, Ill. Ms. McDowell enlisted in the Women's Army Corps and later transferred into the Air Force.

mule part of the way and walked the remainder.

"The mule was very, very nervous," she said. "When the wind would whistle through the trees, she couldn't stand it. She broke loose twice. I had to walk [home] and she was standing at the gate, waiting for me to open it for her."

Ms. McDowell taught for 14 years in one-room schoolhouses in several Illinois counties, including Rush School, the one she attended with her brothers and sisters northwest of Vandalia. She still hears from some of her former students, although "they keep dying off," she said. One former pupil wrote an editorial in a local newspaper about how teachers are underpaid.

"I started [teaching for] \$87.50 [per year], and I had to do my own janitorial work," Ms. McDowell said. "I wrote to him and told him I'm being paid when I hear from or receive a letter from one of my pupils. I'm still being paid now."

Ms. McDowell changed careers once she learned the military began accepting women during World War II, because she'd always wanted to travel. After making the decision to enlist in the Women's Army Corps, she had to delay

several months until Nov. 18, 1943, because of a commitment to the school.

"I'd already submitted a contract to teach the next year," she said. "Papa always told us when you sign a contract to keep it, and don't ever go back on it. An oral contract is just as binding as a written one. So since I'd signed the contract, I had to teach the next year."

Women's issues weren't foremost in her mind in 1943. Her biggest motivation was what she calls "a yen for travel." But a letter from her mother prevented her from asking for an overseas assignment during the war.

"When I was in basic [training], I got a letter from my mother after I told her I wanted to go overseas," Ms. McDowell said. "She said, 'Why do you want to go overseas and cross that big ocean?'"

"So I took my application back and said I'll go if they call me, but I won't ask to go overseas."

After training, Ms. McDowell was assigned to Roswell Army Airfield, N.M., and her first job was packing parachutes. But she soon had trouble sleeping because she imagined something going wrong for an Airman on a B-17 Flying

Fortress because of a problem with a parachute she may have packed.

"I didn't like the job because I thought I might make a mistake and would cause an Airman to die from poor parachute packing," she said. "So I asked for another job, and I worked in supply issuing airplane parts to the mechanics working on planes on the line."

Ms. McDowell was honorably discharged after the war in December 1945, but re-enlisted March 18, 1946, and later transferred into the Air Force. This time, she asked to go overseas. She turned down an initial assignment in Japan and was sent to Germany instead, where she worked in the technical order library.

She lived in an old hotel in Wiesbaden, Germany, that hadn't been bombed. The city, located on the northern bank of the Rhine River, is one of the oldest spa towns in Europe. The name literally means "meadow bath."

"The people were poor," Ms. McDowell said. "They'd lost their homes and their jobs [during the war]. A lot of their families had been killed. We would see little boys, maybe 5 years up to about 8 or 9, out scrounging in garbage barrels.

They wore shorts, no shirts, and you could count their ribs, they were so skinny. It kind of hurt that they had to eat out of garbage."

Even American military members living in post-war Germany had to deal with difficult conditions, especially in 1947 when the Rhine experienced one of its worst dry periods.

"We couldn't take a bath because we had to keep water in the bathtub to flush the toilet," Ms. McDowell said. "One time, I had to go to work without brushing my teeth because there wasn't a drop of water in the place. That night, I scrounged around three or four floors up and found an old water glass. So I kept that glass filled for brushing my teeth. The poor Germans were worse off than we were. You'd see them at the well waiting for every little cup of water."

Ms. McDowell left the military as a WAC corporal in 1949. After she left active duty, Ms. McDowell completed her 20 years in the Reserve. She never married or had children of her own, although she has many surviving nieces, nephews and great-nieces and nephews.

When she looks back on her 103 years so far, she has only a few regrets. She wishes she still had her Women's Air Force uniform for her burial and that her father could've seen her in it. But she also remembers something her mother told her when she asked about pictures in her childhood home. There was a picture of her father with the older children and an individual photo of young Mildred when she was only a few months old. "Why," she wanted to know, "was there not a picture of their father with the rest of the children?"

"Mom said, 'We didn't expect you to live to be a year old,'" Ms. McDowell said. "I think they'd all be really surprised that I'm still here."